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A Tough, Ambitious Mayor Works on His Image

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

MOSCOW, Feb. 22 — Hands fixed firmly at his sides, Yuri M. Luzhkov slurped down a pancake as a flock of well-wishers applauded.

Devouring a blini dripping with sour cream using only the mouth may be a Russian party tradition, but inviting the Western press to come along is not typical behavior for Moscow's pugnacious Mayor.

An iron-fisted boss, he has been more interested in flaunting his credentials as a Russian nationalist than in courting Western opinion.

But as Russia's politicians maneuver to succeed President Boris N. Yeltsin, Mr. Luzhkov, 62, is trying to overhaul his imperious image in the foreign press. Guided by a new team of media-savvy aides, the new Mr. Luzhkov wants to be seen as an amiable and folksy statesman.

To prove it, he boarded a bus on Sunday with a small group of foreign correspondents and, microphone in hand, gave a tour of his city. Police officers saluted and city workers stopped shoveling piles of snow as the entourage zoomed by.

Then Mr. Luzhkov rollicked with the news media on the Kolomenskoye Estate, the hunting grounds of Peter the Great, as he celebrated Maslenitsa, the Russian holiday that marks the beginning of Lent and celebrates the approach of spring.

From this burst of revelry a more human side of Mr. Luzhkov emerged: The Mayor lives at an official countryside residence outside Moscow. His consuming passion is raising bees. He is also an admirer of Catherine the Great and an expert on the city sewer system, and he believes that the idiosyncrasies of the Russian character are best explained by the seasons.

"The Russian summer is short, and to survive, people have to use each day to gather firewood and collect hay," Mr. Luzhkov explained, as his guests stood before a bountiful table of blini, caviar and, despite the early hour, bottles of vodka.

"But during winter the Russian lies on the stove," he said. "He's got nothing to do, and this is where all the stupid things come from, like drinking and laziness. Russian life has never been continuous, but is a kind of series of outbursts followed by periods of doing nothing."

Mr. Luzhkov, a former manager in the Soviet chemical industry, can hardly be accused of being lazy. The bald and stocky Mayor works long hours. And despite reports of links with a mysterious and powerful holding company, A.F.K. Sistema, he remains broadly popular in Moscow.

On weekends he makes the rounds of construction projects and plays soccer with city officials — contrasting his vigor with the sickly condition of the 68-year-old President.

Moscow's Mayor wants to be seen as less imperious and more folksy.

Mr. Luzhkov was a widower, then remarried. His wife, now 35, is a businesswoman whose company has prospered by outfitting a Moscow stadium with plastic seats and by selling plastic glasses, forks and plates to Russkoye Bistro, a city-owned fast food chain. They have two young daughters.

Certainly American politicians also like to advertise their common touch. President Bush, for example, played horseshoes. But Mr. Luzhkov's Sunday outing was unusual. In the past, city officials have rarely had much time for foreign news organizations.

The times, and the city officials, have changed. Mr. Luzhkov is now

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Peter Blakely/Saba, for The New York Times

Mayor Yuri M. Luzhkov of Moscow danced in the snow in a city park on Sunday during a celebration of Maslenitsa, the Russian holiday that marks the beginning of Lent and celebrates the approach of spring.

pursuing the presidency with zeal. And he has a new, sophisticated political team determined to build his image as a statesman.

That team includes Sergei V. Yastrzhembsky, a canny former ambassador who was ousted from his post as Mr. Yeltsin's spokesman because of his sympathy for Mr. Luzhkov. Mr. Yastrzhembsky now serves as a top city official for international affairs and public relations.

Sporting a natty cap, Mr. Yastrzhembsky did his best to help the cause: prompting the Mayor to expound on how he gave the honey from his bees to needy orphanages.

Then there is Andrei A. Kokoshin, the former secretary of Mr. Yeltsin's Security Council, who has become a top aide in Mr. Luzhkov's newly created FatherLand Party. Mr. Kokoshin did not make the party on Sunday, but he knows the value of good ties with the West.

As part of the image-building campaign, Mr. Luzhkov is also seeking a White House meeting with President Clinton, say the Mayor's aides and American officials.

Moscow is much better off than other regions, and the Mayor has made a point of visiting churches, mosques and synagogues in the city and fighting anti-Semitism.

But image-making for Mr. Luzhkov is not the easiest task. He has staked out a nationalist stance, in an effort to broaden his appeal beyond the capital. He also has embraced the autocratic leader of Belarus, asserted Russia's claim to the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol, lambasted Russian market reformers who are the darlings of the West and assailed NATO's expansion.

On Sunday, though, Mr. Luzhkov was everybody's favorite uncle and a real muzhik, the colloquial term for a man's man. A genial host, he danced hand in hand with his press, rode a horse and gave a lecture on the restorative powers of bee pollen, all the while staying clear of what was really on everyone's mind: politics.

Ever so gently, Mr. Luzhkov's ambitions appeared to intrude. Drawing on his expertise as a beekeeper, Mr. Luzhkov explained how the queen bee tries in vain to hold on to her power by preventing a new queen from being born.

Mr. Luzhkov never mentioned the ailing Mr. Yeltsin by name. But to some of the hard-nosed press, the allusion seemed clear. Then, bursting with health and energy, Mr. Luzhkov raced out and danced in the snow.